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SUBJECT: THE SHIFT IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE: IS SERBIA BECOMING MORE
EUROPEAN?

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SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) A series of traumatic events in Serbia in recent weeks, including the cancellation of a Pride Parade and the brutal murder of a French tourist, has prompted a new level of introspection among the Serbian public regarding shared values and the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Despite the current political fling with Russia, most Serbs long for better relations with the United States, identify with Europe, and are tired of being viewed as "Balkan Beasts." Instead of focusing on familiar themes such as Kosovo and victimhood, the media and, increasingly, the officials whom they quote are directly linking recent displays of intolerance and nationalistic violence to Serbia's role in the events of the 1990s. While Serbia is still far from a model of a modern liberal democratic society, this new level of soul-searching signals a tipping point in its struggle toward normalcy, and a sign of readiness to put the past behind it. End Summary.

A Time for Reflection

¶12. (SBU) Nine years ago this week, a wide alliance of parties organized mass protests after Slobodan Milosevic disputed the election victory of opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica. The next day, Milosevic conceded defeat and stepped down from power. Throughout the country, Serbs anticipated a rapid transition from the war and isolation of the 1990s to western stability and prosperity. But the jubilation of those days gave way to shattered expectations, personified in the assassination of reformist Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003.

¶12. (SBU) In the years that followed, public and media criticism of Serbia's continual failures and missed opportunities was largely upstaged by populist or anti-western rhetoric, numbing coverage of war crimes trials and, more recently, emotional commentary over Kosovo's February 2008 Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), all of which in turn fed the conservative and ultraconservative ideologies that further hampered Serbia's social progress.

¶13. (SBU) Since the May 2008 elections, however, we have seen a gradual but determined westward shift in editorial policy, and increased introspection that goes beyond the standard topics of Kosovo, war crimes, bankruptcy, and corruption. This change is not a solitary occurrence, but rather the evolutionary consequence of events that have coaxed or shocked the general population into new levels of critical self-assessment.

Shift in Views toward the United States

¶4. (SBU) Among recent watershed events was Vice President Biden's May 2009 trip to Belgrade, which prompted a re-examination of reflexive anti-Americanism in Serbia. This was far more than a visit by the emissary of a popular new U.S. president. As Senator he had been among the strongest advocates for the 1999 NATO intervention that is still resented today; yet here he was in Belgrade, expressing support for Serbia's future. His visit was followed by a string of hopeful statements from the Serbian government; and our assistance, cultural programs, and especially Mil-to-Mil programs began receiving unusually prominent coverage in the media.

¶5. (SBU) The appearance of a U.S. Navy band at the politically conservative and socially traditional Guca trumpet festival, an event that would have been seen as scandalous even a year ago, yielded an eruption of positive national media coverage. A joint effort by the Ohio National Guard and the Serbian army to rebuild a number of schools and hospitals over the summer similarly produced weeks of daily good news. For the first time in years, ordinary Serbs were shown working and even dancing side-by-side with representatives of the same military that for years was blamed for the most recent of Serbia's tragedies.

European Values: Tolerance

¶6. (SBU) In September the canceled Belgrade Pride Parade (reftel) sparked unprecedented debate, forcing Serbs to face issues such as sexual orientation, human rights, intolerance and violence. In the weeks prior, gay-baiting in the tabloids and disapproval or lukewarm support by officials and pundits gradually gave way to a more

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balanced discussion in the context of Serbia's European identity. The media bemoaned intolerance, openly suggesting that Serbia may not be ready for the European Union. The government formally decided to support the parade, but then reversed its position at the last minute in the face of threats by nationalist organizations.

¶7. (SBU) The decision provoked a strong negative reaction from many in the public who saw the decision as capitulation. Media declared that violence had triumphed over democracy and the rule of law. But rather than silencing discussion of human rights, the Parade's cancellation led to more support from officials and public figures, and sustained condemnation of the ultranationalists who still claimed to rule the streets.

Murder of Frenchman Recalls Violence of the 1990s

¶8. (SBU) The September 29 beating death of a French soccer fan who had been assaulted on September 17 by a group of hooligans in downtown Belgrade, combined with the fallout from the Pride Parade, had a sobering effect throughout the country. Thousands of people waited for hours in long lines to lay flowers and candles at several locations in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Pancevo. Mourners, including state officials, left messages of indignation and frustration that the actions of a few were leading to the branding of Serbia as violent.

¶9. (SBU) Spurred on by the media responses to these recent events, officials became more outspoken against violence and its tacit acceptance in Serbia. The climax came from President Tadic on October 2, when he held a press conference on Belgrade's Trg Republike and stated, "I see a direct and uninterrupted thread running from violence during the 1990s, atrocities committed in the region of the former Yugoslavia, support for the protests of the Special Operations Unit, political language that whipped up rage against so-called traitors, to constant hunts for enemies in society.

An atmosphere of hatred against all minorities, against sexual minorities, against minorities with different views was generated. That thread is more than obvious and we must not remain silent." The comment spurred lively discussion. One radio program (B92's

Pescanik), normally critical of the President, devoted an entire 90-minute program to Tadic's statement, suggesting that Serbia had entered a new era: "One small step for democracy, one giant leap for President Tadic." The discussion on societal violence was wide-ranging and drew analogies between recent events and the 2005 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbian basketball player Miladin Kovacevic (who fled the United States in 2008 following the horrific beating of a U.S. college student), Slobodan Milosevic, and 1990s paramilitary leaders such as Arkan, who had lived openly in Yugoslavia in the 1980s despite being on Interpol's Ten Most Wanted list.

Serbia's "New" Politicians

¶10. (SBU) Democratic leaders are not the only source of this tidal shift in public statements. Figures who built their names by standing up to the United States are generating headlines that would have been unthinkable just a few months ago. During the recent visit of Aleksandar Vucic, the vice-president of the Serbian Progressive Party (and former Secretary General of the Serbian Radical Party) to Washington, the headlines were "Serbia Can't Advance Without America" (Politika) and "We Need Both the Russians and the Americans" (Kurir).

Speaking of the 1999 NATO intervention in an interview published October 8 in the daily Alo, Vucic said, "That year cannot be forgotten, but we have to go forward. Some time has passed, some of it is history today. But we have kids, a future, and a serious man has to keep that in mind."

¶11. (SBU) In discussing the new law on media, Interior Minister Dacic, who in an earlier life was Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) spokesman for Slobodan Milosevic, made a clear break with the past, "I was among the first ones to be black-listed by the EU and the United States because of the previous Law on Public Information. And I am still waiting for a visa for my official trip to America even though I am deputy prime minister. As long as I am its president, the SPS will not vote for conflict with the media and the journalists, the cancelling of TV broadcasts of parliamentary sessions, beating citizens, a return to the majority electoral system, or wars."

Is NATO the Enemy or the Future?

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¶12. (SBU) Another milestone was the 10th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Serbia. Rather than being a focal point for anti-American rage, it passed without significant demonstrations and appears to have opened the door for civilized discussion of Serbia's future relationship with NATO. The issue was once darkly taboo, yet each month has brought more statements in the media by opinion and policy makers in support of NATO accession.

¶13. (SBU) Usually evasive on the subject, Defense Minister Sutanovac has leaned further forward in every public statement. Noting that Serbia will soon be surrounded by NATO countries, in Vreme's October 1 issue he said, "What position should we take towards traditionally friendly countries like Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain... from whom we expect and enjoy strong support, although they are in NATO... I think that a debate on the matter will be left aside for a while, but the time will come when we will have to deal with this important issue." He went on to say that it will take lots of courage "to explain to the citizens all the benefits of security integration."

Comment

¶14. (SBU) The shift in tenor in public discourse in recent weeks has been palpable. Serbia is known - even among Serbs - for its fixation with historical narrative and sometimes spiteful determination to act against its own interests; but public discourse in recent months shows this stereotype need not be the rule. For our own part, we have studiously avoided divisive discussions of history and instead described a positive view of Serbia's future, seeking to acknowledge examples of success. By removing ourselves as the imagined obstacle to Serbia's progress while describing a better future in Europe, we

have also helped make it possible for Serbs to begin addressing the past on their own terms. We intend to focus on the message that the Charg underscored in an October 7 speech in Kraljevo, that "the U.S. is dedicated to the idea of helping a democratic and successful Serbia - a Serbia in which all its citizens cultivate tolerance, freedom of expression, and creative spirit." End Comment.

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